THOMSON'S FRIEND

H. N. DICKINSON

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BY

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MY son wrote this story some four or five years ago, but it has not been published before.

I think it had been read by hardly any one except myself. Last summer, before leaving for France, he told me how little store he set by his books, and that the only thing that gave him any satisfaction was *Thomson's Friend*, which lay forgotten in his desk.

I print it now as a little memorial of him for those who knew him personally, as well as for those who only knew him through his work.

E. M. D.

August, 1917.

THOMSON'S FRIEND

THOMSON'S father was a clerk in the service of the Great Western Railway, living at Slough, with the privilege of free transit to and from his work at Paddington Station. He earned sixty shillings a week, or thereabouts. He had a wife and four children. He was a deeply respectable man, well thought of, punctual at his office and regular at Church ; but he was consumptive. At an inconvenient hour he died of his disease, and his widow was constrained to live thereafter in her kitchen while the other parts of the house were let as lodgings to young men recommended by the Vicar or the Stationmaster. She cooked them tolerable meals, kept their rooms something less than altogether clean, grumbled at hard work,

and quite failed to appreciate one peculiar alleviation of her lot. It was this: Her husband had insured his life for a couple of hundred pounds. He had paid the premiums with his usual regularity. By a will made just before his death, he left the sum to a higher official of the Railway Company in trust for the education of his children. So the widow was freed from expense and anxiety on this commonly troublesome score, and Thomson, with his two brothers, continued to attend Mr. Ringler's commercial day school "for the sons of gentlemen."

Thomson was the eldest, a dark and delicate boy, ten years of age when his father died. He had large timid brown eyes, and was not without traces of a chorister-like beauty apt to be more appreciated by kind old ladies in the streets than by companions at school. He was not—let us know it at once—a devout, or good, or nice little boy. His church-going ceased at his father's death,

leaving him apprised that he would some day have to wear a crown and hold a harp in an uninviting spot called Heaven. Luckily the day seemed distant. As for goodness, he was the slovenly son of a slovenly mother, and drifted through his childhood only shy of naughtiness because he was fearful of punishment; his wits, likewise, worked solely to guide him clear of painful encounters with his teachers or schoolfellows—principally the latter, for he was the permanent butt of bullies. As bullies perversely seek out the timid for their sport, Thomson's wits were in frequent use. He could tell at a glance the lusty sort of boy dangerous to himself, whether big or little, and knew how to avoid his notice, and how to sob and scream well before he was hurt; he knew the cringing answer that may (though it may not) turn away wrath; he knew how to use his soft eyes on his teachers with intent that they should excuse laziness and lighten labour.

He knew the arts, in a word, of an idle and cowardly child.

The short and natural route from Thomson's home to Thomson's school was by the road from Slough to Datchet, in length not more than a mile and a half. But throughout the whole of this distance it was the pastime of his companions to knock his books from under his arm and assault his person while he stooped to pick them up. This practice, with many variations and additions, caused Thomson to frequent another route, much longer, which lay through Windsor and Eton. His taste for walking unpersecuted was enhanced by a positive liking for long and lonely journeys; hence it was small hardship for him to go four miles in peace instead of a mile and a half in distressing humiliation. While he walked he would dream dreams and enjoy again in memory the stories of adventure which he had read, applying them by imagination to his own case, picturing himself

a hero of war whom none would dare vex, or a redoubtable baron, with dungeons and ruthless retainers to avenge him of his wrongs. There were days when he would trudge upon his way a full hour conceiving in no little detail the horrid sufferings of boys who had used him ill, and their cries for mercy, and the words in which he would point out that they had neither deserved mercy from him nor were likely to get it. So pleasant were these reflections that he never thought of asking his brothers to join him on his roundabout journeys from school, or his sister on his rambles in the country on Sundays and half-holidays.

One day, when Thomson was twelve years old, it chanced, while he was walking in realistic and delightful rumination, half-way through the High Street of Eton, that a couple of his foes met him in the solid flesh and hailed him with well-deserved taunts, kicking his school

books about the pavement and himself into the gutter. That was all. Thomson escaped so lightly that he plumed himself once again on his shrewdness in walking along roads too public for prolonged bouts of bullying. His foes vanished, and he picked up his scattered books. The fourth and last had fetched up at the feet of a tall Eton schoolboy, who was standing outside a confectioner's shop watching the entertainment. He must have been a civil or good-natured boy, for he picked up the book and held it out to Thomson, not speaking, indeed, but smiling in a pleasant, patronising fashion. Thomson, mean little wretch, did not feel grateful but did feel flattered. He had never yet had an encounter, even so trivial as this, with any of the Eton boys, though he had often admired the strong or swaggering small ones of near his own age, at whom he could stare without the least danger of word or blow.

He never again saw his good-natured

Etonian, or never to his knowledge, for the remembrance of his face passed away. But the incident had an extraordinarily curious sequel. Thomson thought how nice it would be, and how much more true to life than any of his other dreams, if a big friendly boy, like him of the incident with the book, were to become his champion against the bullies at Mr. Ringler's. He walked all the way to Burnham Beeches handling this idea. According to habit, he made it as concrete as he was able; the boy was to be a particular boy, an Eton boy, whom he would first meet by just such a chance as that which had actually occurred; his name was to be Oscar, because Thomson had liked it in a book he had been reading; he was not merely to pick up Thomson's book, but to take off his jacket and gloriously thrash Thomson's assailants till they howled and howled and howled. Afterwards he and Thomson were to swear eternal friendship. Again

and again their friendship was to be tested by further encounters between Oscar and the teasing foes of Thomson, always with the same result, and with ever-growing intimacy between defender and defended. The hours that Thomson spent in shaping visions of these doings are to be counted by the hundred and the thousand. Upon his walks, in bed, at school, and even at meals, the fascinating dream kept hold of him. Whatsoever details might enrich it he found as he thought upon it. By degrees he equipped the fictitious Oscar with every quality that could flatter a friend's vanity, till he had him complete with his highest conception of boyish beauty, strength, wealth, possessions, titles, influence, and affection above all; while each attribute was proved by a splendid event or scene in which Oscar was at Thomson's side.

But he had too much imagination to let him suppose that life or friendship can consist altogether of crises; he did

not even wish it—he wanted Oscar to thrash his foes for him, indeed, but also to be his companion and possession in the quieter courses of friendship. Thus, since Thomson was fond of long walks, Oscar must be fond of them too, and bear him company along the lanes and across the fields, and they must talk confidentially together. Thomson must have the perpetual pride of being intimate with the boldest and strongest and handsomest of Eton boys. The wish was easily gratified, and Thomson duly made himself suppose that Oscar was with him on his walks. He fixed the particulars of Oscar's appearance, the colour of his eyes, the shape of his nose, the length of his legs, and all else, including the clothes (very nice ones) that he wore. Thus occupied in deep meditation upon Oscar it often happened, on the lonely reaches of his walks, that he passed from strenuously pretending that Oscar was beside him into half-believing that his dream was true, that

Oscar in some fashion was actually present—invisible, inaudible, intangible, but real. Thomson would then confide his troubles in sober earnest to this paragon among friends, not speaking aloud but mentally framing his sentences; and he was rewarded by an unexampled facility in imagining what Oscar said in reply. The pleasure and comfort of this fancied intercourse became the most material circumstance of his life.

But the critic will see that Thomson was still no better off when other boys called him names and knocked him about, for Oscar was not Castor or Pollux, to appear at the moment of battle, and Thomson must needs accommodate himself to this flaw in the arrangement. He ruled, as the judges say, that Oscar was present only when he himself was alone and outside a certain radius of Slough. With this limited system he contented himself during several months, till, in its turn, it proved defective. How was a

radiant hero like Oscar to bear with a wretched little boy whose tale was always: "Jones boxed my ears this morning"; "Smith calls me Moony Looney"; "Brown twisted my arm yesterday till I would kneel and beg pardon for knowing the date of Queen Anne"; "My mother says I'm the idiot of my family"; "This mark is where my sister stuck a pin in me"? Thus the situation needed changing; the romantic fabric required another buttress. Thomson decided that he too would become a creature of dreamland, would have his pretended fights and triumphs, and tell them to Oscar to deserve his love and appear more worthy of his companionship. This he did, one fine October evening, when Oscar had seemed unusually close and real beside him on the deserted road. He told a circumstantial tale of his valour in combat with a red-headed ruffian called Deacon, all carefully prepared, and he waited for the points at which Oscar was to smile, applaud, caress,

and encourage. It had recently happened that Thomson, in telling his troubles, became aware of astonishingly distinct messages from Oscar, messages so sharp and sudden that he could not believe them to come from any mental process of his own, but thought they must have been placed in his mind by Oscar as directly as one person speaks to another. "Never mind what the others think; I'm your friend, old fellow"—messages like these had been the very substance of his joy. He expected now a word of praise as distinct as the past words of sympathy. Much to his surprise, it did not come. On the contrary, from the outset of his story he felt something strange and wrong in the situation, and by the end he was fully convinced of what it was. Oscar was no longer present.

By no effort, by no wrench of his imagination, was Thomson able to recall him either then or in the weeks that followed. The loss was terrible. Thom-

son entered on many desolate days, bereft of his single interest in life and unable to guess the cause of the calamity. It was only by the accident of a boy at school being caned for lying, that Thomson, whom the spectacle impressed, came to wonder if Oscar had been keeping away to punish him for the grossly false story of his adventure with red-headed Deacon.

The question was no sooner asked than answered. There, in the dusty schoolroom, in the failing light of a winter's afternoon, with boys and master eyeing the clock for the desired stroke of four, Oscar was again present. Every particular was instantly clear in Thomson's imagination, more vivid and indubitable than ever before. Dressed in a long grey driving-coat, his hands in his pockets, his cap pulled low over his forehead, Oscar was sitting on the desk at which Thomson wrote — yes, long before Thomson had time to think it all out — swinging one

leg, smiling his sunny smile, looking down at Thomson in perfect forgiveness of the offence. "You stupid ass!" he was saying, "why didn't you spot long ago why I didn't come to you? Of course I won't have you telling lies to me. Do you think I'd tell lies to you? Or to any one?"

Before dismissing the school at four o'clock, Mr. Ringler made an announcement about the theatricals with which some of the bigger boys were to enliven the breaking-up party before Christmas. Luckily Thomson was not among the performers, for he heard not a word that Mr. Ringler said. Remember, it was the first time he had ever had Oscar beside him in a room full of people. The bare idea of that most splendid boy in England being actually here as his own friend amid the sordid and familiar surroundings of the schoolroom was too intoxicating to leave Thomson a free agent. His pleasure and pride were so vehement that he felt

the need of some signal expression of his gratitude for Oscar's goodness to him. What could he do? What could he say? Wildly daring, he put the question mentally to Oscar, ready for any answer, careless of consequences, passionately desirous to be more worthy of his friend. Immediately his heart gave him the answer from Oscar, who remained more gay and strong and kind than ever at the sweetest moment of the past: the answer was that Thomson should walk home with the other boys and defend himself against persecution.

In the stir and noise of the dismissal of the school at a quarter past four Thomson lost sight of Oscar; he felt his presence no more, but he had a presentiment that he would be waiting for him at home if in the meantime he could do his will. So great was his eagerness for the next meeting that he did, with daring beyond the needful, provoke, defy, assault, and hurt a notable member of the gang that

harassed him. He got the worst of it, but not till he had accounted well of his new prowess. The blows he received were painless compared with those he had taken passively in the past, and the blows he dealt left marks that could be seen for days. The spell of persecution was dissolved, and he earned in its place the unspeakable pleasure of Oscar's approbation.

All who were in contact with Thomson marked how his nature changed after this time. The alteration occurred by fits and starts, with many a relapse, but his progress in the main was steady. Spirit awoke in him, and a fearless honesty, and a kindly regard for other people's feelings, and a resolve to make some use of his schooling. Alongside these he acquired a cheerful countenance and an approximation to the ways of normal boys, though he did not lose his love of lonely walking. Such were the outward signs. The inward history would

fill volumes with the tale of all that passed between Oscar and himself, the manifold estrangements, the search for the cause of Oscar's contempt in each instance, the discovery, the plea for pardon, the ready forgiveness and reconciliation, and the effective resolve of Thomson to shed the bad habit or acquire the good one according to Oscar's taste. Small wonder that the imaginary friendship gripped him more and more firmly. To become aware of Oscar's presence was ever less of an effort and more of a habit. Walking, he had Oscar at his right hand; standing still, Oscar faced him, generally in the attitude of a soldier standing at ease, and often with an amused smile at his stupidity. In his mother's house, when he sat at meals with his family, Oscar stood by the fireplace or leaned against the window with folded arms; when he was in bed, Oscar sat on the blankets at Thomson's feet, his back against the bed-rail; at school, Oscar sat on the desk and

watched the book or paper at which Thomson worked. Sometimes he was merry, sometimes he was solemn, sometimes he was sharply dictatorial. His attention was always bestowed wholly upon Thomson. Often enough his messages fell swift and sudden into Thomson's heart, but as a rule it was merely his mood which Thomson perceived, that he was praising, blaming, warning, commanding, or consoling. This could be seen in the expression of his face.

Thomson had never any visual or auditory illusions about Oscar; he never imagined that he saw or heard him with his bodily senses. Yet he was so well acquainted with his appearance that he would recognise some person in the streets whose ears or eyes reminded him of Oscar's, or whose figure resembled Oscar's when he walked, and a chance tone in the voices of some people would wake the same association. He could have described every feature of Oscar's

face, which was superlatively handsome and attractive, also his gestures and mannerisms. He knew and loved even the clothes that Oscar wore, which were conceived from the unconscious study of such well-dressed young men as Thomson had chanced to see. And he never wavered in his belief that Oscar had somewhere a great castle, with servants and carriages and horses. Yet he was troubled by no thought of inconsistency in supposing the owner of these things to be always at his side. The only marvel was in Oscar's condescension. In the matter of age, Oscar grew at the same pace as Thomson; he was always about two years his senior.

Thomson left school to become a clerk in the service of the railway, like his father, and had a ticket to take him between Slough and Paddington each day. In obedience to Oscar's wish, he contributed handsomely to the expenses of his mother's home, and he worked

very well at his desk. In his leisure he now had less taste for solitude, since the charm of Oscar's companionship became keener and easier among the activities of social life than at other times. Oscar inspired him to join a football club, and stood watching, often with signs of amusement, while he played the game. For Oscar's sake, Thomson became an extremely dashing, if not a very powerful, player.

Such were his good nature and light-heartedness that the very fellows who had once bullied him now competed for his friendship. He was thought to be good company, as persons of cheerful disposition usually are, and he took obvious pleasure in doing a kindness to any of his acquaintance. Among his fellow-clerks and in the football club he became conspicuously popular. Hence arose a temptation and a long struggle. In the zest of good-fellowship he began to drink beer, which Oscar at first permitted, and

presently it happened that on each convivial occasion Thomson drank more than was good for him. Oscar despised him for it. Strong indeed must have been the temptation for the sake of which he could endure a barrier two years long between himself and Oscar, with many an agonising scene of repentance and many a broken promise. But the dark days passed, and Thomson loved Oscar a thousandfold more dearly for his patience and forgiveness and help.

The reward of this hard-won victory was that Oscar entered yet more closely into Thomson's life. He had already expelled from the young man's nature all that was mean, ungenerous, and indolent; he had already taught him a great measure of self-discipline. He now proceeded to root out the remains of his incompetence and silliness. At his office, it was by pausing frequently to consult Oscar that Thomson gained a number of

qualities which employers hold dear in their servants, qualities such as speed and accuracy and judgment. If this or that decision must be made in a hurry, without reference to higher authority, it was Oscar who guided Thomson, always aright, by one of those strange messages that he would place in Thomson's heart whenever it was asked of him. So, also, he taught him the way to work quickly. Take this, together with his happy and willing disposition, with his pleasant manner, too, and it is easy to explain why the railway people valued and promoted Thomson. All stupid and exaggerated views of life, too, were knocked out of Thomson by Oscar's lordly common sense. He learned the distinction between being kind and being fussy.

It remains only to say that Thomson, at the age of thirty, was known for the most cheerful of mortal men. How could he have been otherwise? Whatever moments are painful or weary in the

course of life were bearable in his case through the assistance of the radiant personage whose beauty he could ever contemplate, whose counsel he could ever have, whose company he could ceaselessly enjoy with the whole strength of his appreciation. Whatever moments are bright, again, the same cause doubly brightened. Tired after a day's labour, he would travel home in a railway carriage where others sought solace in the evening newspapers, while he, uniquely fortunate, could refresh himself by communion with a being whom squalor and exhaustion never touched. The compartment might be full, yet Oscar was there. Thomson would look at the jaded, saddened faces around him, and compare them with the cloudless beauty of his vision ; comparing also the narrow interests of others with the immeasurable nobility of the nature of his friend. He, too, might read a newspaper or a book, but not wearily, for the dullest matter

sprang to the height of interest when he turned to find what Oscar thought about it. He loved Oscar's graceful person not less than before, but loved his mind and character better, because he was more able to appreciate the glory of such things. He could know Oscar's thoughts at all times on every subject, and contemplate them, finding them always clothed with interest first, then with grandeur, then with pure beauty, till the whole world grew lustrous in the light of them, and Thomson's emotion would leap to the very skies in sheer gratitude to Oscar for existing. Many a time he would crave to admit others to a share of the riches of Oscar's friendship. He could think of no hopeful way of doing this, however, nor did Oscar give any message in respect of it; Oscar told him to be generous and loyal and serviceable to each person in each case.

In the summer of his thirty-first year Thomson contracted a chill while pad-

dling his sister in a canoe on the Thames, and was seriously ill for three weeks. Afterwards, the chief of his department at Paddington gave him money enough to keep him comfortably for a fortnight at the seaside, and here it was, in solitude again, under the blazing sunshine on the beach below the cliffs, or among the breezes sweeping the downs, that he passed through the supreme happiness of his life, and suddenly came into the shadow of the most dire alarm.

His happiness was due to his having Oscar to himself, privately, as of old, but harmoniously set among the graces and glories of green country and blue sea. He had always known that Oscar somewhere possessed a castle and a park. Now at last he could easily imagine he was in Oscar's park. It made a further stage of intimacy, a thing that had hardly seemed possible. To be alone with Oscar among his own spacious surroundings with no effort to make, no fault to over-

come, no problem to solve, with leisure simply to love the fair perfection of his friend, was new experience. He made a discovery too: he gazed in imagination on the beloved familiar face, and realised that if Oscar had been known first as a handsome and bold boy, then as a firm friend, then as a noble gentleman, he was now also the most sublime of philosophers, and the beauty of his friendship made Thomson wiser than the aged.

Lovingly he recalled Oscar young and merry in his long driving coat that day at Ringler's, and beheld the same face now grown inflexibly manly and serene with the mastery of all knowledge. Oscar knew all that needed to be known, knew it behind his straight, clear eyes, and would tell it to Thomson as need or occasion arose. An enthralling wonder filled Thomson at the thought of his good fortune and the gratitude he owed. What would his life have been without Oscar!

What an abject boyhood! What a dreary round of toil! What a despicable character! What empty, aimless days! What an unspeakable lack of the bliss and boons so freely poured upon him! What a death in place of life!

Then in the last days of his visit the insidious terror opened fire. Suppose he should die young, like his father, and lose the friendship which he had hoped to keep with all-pervading enjoyment for numberless years to come! A thought so dreadful he would naturally have laid before Oscar, like others, to find an answer and a fund of new courage; but he discovered that he could not. He was not able, or did not dare, to bring the subject into Oscar's presence. It remained as a dull ache in his heart, and possibly it hastened the very calamity from the fear of which it arose.

Thomson went back to his work and home, was intermittently ill during the summer and autumn, and grew suddenly

worse when the cold weather set in. His case was hopeless and his time likely to be so short that none thought it necessary to send him to a hospital or sanatorium for consumptives; he was tended by a district nurse and allowed to remain in such peace as his home provided. But there was a clergyman who worked at the office of a charity in London, and had met and liked Thomson on the railway. He visited him. Religious consolation was utterly wasted on Thomson; he had seldom entered a church since his childhood, and was directly antagonised by any reference to his prospects in the next world. However, such was the torment of his fear of losing Oscar that he told the clergyman the entire story of his imaginary friendship, and risked a despairing question upon his chance of retaining his dear friend after death. It was all he cared about.

The clergyman gave no opinion. But he came night after night to hear more

of the tale which Thomson was glad enough to relate—all that dealt with Oscar being music to his soul—and the clergyman's perplexity grew so great as to be painful. He related the matter to his wife, who briefly denounced Thomson as a heathen worshipping the idol of his own fancy, as the Israelites worshipped the golden calf made by their hands. But that would not do. The clergyman was inclined to think that in Thomson he had found a rare specimen of religious genius, a man who had lived eighteen years in unbroken spiritual communion with a benign, perhaps an angelic, personality.

How could that be called false worship which by its fruits had shown itself true. One who had walked with God as Thomson had walked with Oscar would be called a saint. Nothing could hold back such a man from the highest religious experience, and Thomson, it appeared, had at least experienced the absolute

transformation of his nature. The clergyman would have felt certain that "Oscar" came by the bounty of Heaven to the poor little schoolboy, expressly sent, but for a few points that puzzled him. Why the stress laid, for instance, on Thomson's using his fists against the school bullies? Would not patient endurance have been more Christian? Why also was "Oscar" so handsome that Thomson said no words could describe his comeliness? Why was he rich and well-dressed and strong? Why had he intervened with advice about matters in the office, and actually *laughed* at Thomson's first clumsy attempts to play football? Why had he deprecated the officious acts of kindness, usually a marked feature in the lives of our contemporary saints? Why, above all, had he never told Thomson to go to church?

All these doubts kept the clergyman in hesitation, much though he wished to tell Thomson that over the gulf of death he

would find his friend waiting. He would not say what he did not wholly believe, nevertheless, and the situation stood still for a time until the clergyman went on business to Manchester, where he consulted the Canon at whose house he stayed. Between them it was decided to tell Thomson that "Oscar" was an angel, whom he would meet hereafter, but to add that certain things remained for Thomson to believe before the portals of the next world were likely to open to him. They were few, simple, and ten minutes would suffice for them to be told and accepted.

Even this short space was not allowed, however, for when the clergyman returned to Slough and called at the sick man's house, he learned Thomson was dead. Thomson's mother, ceremoniously dabbing her dry cheeks, told the records of his last moments. Incidentally, she said: "He was happy at the end, poor fellow, but very delirious, and never had

a thought for the loss to me, as he used to have when you came to visit him before. He was very delirious, and kept on talking about some one or other—Oscar, the name was; I suppose it's one of the clerks at Paddington. But he can't ever have been so set on him as you'd think from his delirium, for I've never heard him speak the name before."

"What did he say of him, Mrs. Thomson?" the clergyman asked.

"Oh, what *didn't* he say, sir; I'm sure I can't recollect it all. 'Oscar,' he says, 'Oh, Oscar, Oscar! Oh, mother, Oscar says it's all right. He will be there. We shan't be parted. Oscar will go on just the same as before. Oh, he is stronger than death. Isn't he glorious? Isn't he wonderful? He's going to stay for ever and ever.'"

The clergyman read the burial service over Thomson. He continued to think that the case was the strangest he had met. Most people think of Heaven he

reflected, as a state or region to which they may go after death; but here was one who entered Heaven while living at Slough and working at Paddington, and died almost without guessing that it might extend beyond those places.

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